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Mentoring is Just Reaching out and Sharing our Experience

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Meredith is a faculty librarian at Portland Community College and an instructor at San Jose State University's iSchool. She writes the monthly column "Technology in Practice" for *American Libraries* and the blog *Information Wants to be Free*. Meredith was honored in 2009 with the LITA/Library Hi Tech award for Outstanding Communication in Library and Information Technology, and in 2014 with the ACRL Instruction Section Innovation Award.

When I graduated from library school in 2004, I was a lot more clueless and less experienced than most new librarians I see applying for jobs today. I'd worked for less than a year at a public library and completed a practicum in a university archive, which only served to convince me that I didn't want to work in archives. I didn't have a clue about how to write a compelling cover letter or to play up my previous experience as a social worker, and eight months into the job hunt and five since graduating library school, I was rapidly losing hope of ever finding a job.

Just before leaving library school, I had started a blog in which I wrote about technology in libraries, and chronicled my awful and sometimes humorous experiences on the job hunt. Lucky for me, an experienced librarian and reader of my blog, Paul Pival of the University of Calgary Libraries, stepped up and offered to read my cover letter and resume. The advice he offered completely altered the course of my job search. After he tore apart and helped me rebuild my application materials, I found myself getting first and second interviews at the sorts of institutions where I really wanted to work. Soon, I had my dream job as a distance learning librarian in the beautiful state of Vermont. Had he not shared his experience so generously, I fear my job search could have gone on much longer, my unimpressive materials never distinguishing me as a viable candidate.

My blog soon led to an offer to write a book about social media, which led to lots of offers to speak at conferences. I was suffering mightily from impostor syndrome and didn't feel like I could do any of this, nor did I have the slightest clue to ask for an honorarium for preparing and giving a presentation. A friend I made through my blogging, Roy Tennant of OCLC, encouraged me, advised me, and helped me ask for what my contribution was worth. While I've never totally gotten over my impostor syndrome, Roy helped



me see that I was capable of much more than I thought and that people would take advantage of me if I didn't ask for what I was worth. It was an invaluable lesson.

I've never had a formal mentor, but I have had a number of informal mentors who shared their wisdom and encouragement generously at times in my career when I needed it most. It probably didn't take much effort for them to do what they did, but the fact that they were willing to reach out made a world of difference to me. All I had to do was reach out to the library community—which I did through my blog—and I found that there were lots of experienced librarians willing to reach back. I recognize I was lucky to have started blogging at just the right time in the evolution of social media. As someone who is often reluctant to seek help from others, I was even luckier that people were willing to mentor me without my having to ask. And because I feel blessed for what happened to me, I wanted to give back.

The Oregon Library Association (OLA) is an amazing organization. If you have an idea and are willing to put in the effort to make it happen, you will find lots of enthusiastic support. When I suggested that OLA build a mentoring program for early-career librarians at an information session at the 2012 OLA Conference, I was approached by the Membership Committee Chair, Emily Papagni of the Multnomah County Library, who informed me that another librarian was interested in doing the same thing. I quickly found myself partnered with the amazing Shirley Sullivan of the Beaverton City Library, and with Emily's help, we developed a proposal for the OLA Board. In less than a year, the OLA Mentoring Program was up and running.

The OLA Mentoring Program is designed to match early-career library employees in Oregon with mentors who have five or more years of experience working in libraries. Active since 2013, the program has matched up approximately 60 early-career library staff with mentors. Mentors and mentees commit to a relationship of at least one-year (or nine months for those on nine-month contracts), though the majority state in their end-of-mentoring-year surveys that they plan to continue the relationship. Mentors are matched based on the mentee's goals, the mentor's experience, and geography. We try to match people who live relatively close to each other, but sometimes that doesn't work out due to the mentee's goals or the makeup of our pool of willing mentors. Based on our surveys, somewhere around 65 percent of mentoring pairs meet in-person and many more communicate via email or over the phone. While we do our best to find good matches for applicants, occasionally, we end up with problematic matches for a variety of reasons. However, in our end-of-year surveys, 94 percent of responding mentees reported their mentor was supportive and 83 percent reported satisfaction with the mentoring relationship.

Last year, I had the pleasure of not only administering the OLA Mentoring Program, but of being a mentor myself. I'm not sure I was really the best mentor to my mentee, simply because she didn't need very much. She was one of those early-career librarians who, as soon as you meet her, it is obvious that she is going to do big things. Other than providing encouragement, a little advice, and feedback on one of her articles, I don't feel like I did much. Then again, mentoring isn't supposed to be hard! It's supposed to be about sharing experience and encouragement with someone who could benefit from both, and I hope I



provided that in a way that was helpful to her. It's really gratifying to see her achieving so much recognition and success in her career now.

Currently, I'm the Chair of the OLA Membership Committee and am administering the OLA Mentoring Program with the wonderful Lisa Molinelli of Portland State University, Emily-Jane Dawson of the Multnomah County Library, and Chris King of the Hillsboro Public Library. They all give of their time so generously to support this valuable program. Everyone who has been involved in administering the OLA Mentoring Program has been motivated by either having had a fantastic mentor early in their career or wishing they had and wanting others to have such a valuable career development experience.

Very soon, there will be an additional way to support early-career library staff. The OLA Membership Committee and the OLA New Member Roundtable have collaborated to develop a resume and cover letter review program that will be launching in Winter 2016. This program will provide short-term mentoring focused specifically on providing advice on a job seeker's cover letter and resume. Advice might run the gamut from writing and formatting issues, to highlighting previous experience, to suggesting experiences and skills the candidate might want to get to become more marketable for the job they want. It will meet an important need in our community, given the number of new library school graduates struggling to find work in Oregon libraries.

So many of us in this field suffer from impostor syndrome, so it can be hard to imagine that we have something valuable to offer an early-career librarian or staff-person. Try to remember your new-to-libraries self. How much do you know now that you wish you had known back then? If you can think of even a few things, you probably have a great deal to offer someone new to libraries. Whether you participate in a formal program or informally take someone under your wing, sharing experience and encouragement costs us so little and can benefit a new librarian immeasurably. I'm living proof of that. 🐼

